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Between Fiction and History

Modes of Writing Abortion in Africa[1]

Nancy Rose Hunt

"A history of ... modes of writing would therefore
be the best of social phenomenologies."
Roland Barthes, 1953
"The older distinction between fiction and history
... must give place to the recognition that we can
only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or
likening it to the *imaginable*."
Hayden White, 1978

1 "May I comment on illegal abortions that have become a daily resort for our unmarried women in the country today." So wrote Patrick J. Euppa to the editorial pages of Tanzania's *Sunday Post* in 1971. "In such cases, death is a close companion. If it does not end in death, then there is a danger of infection, sometimes leading to sterility [. . .]. The high rate of criminal abortion is probably due to the fact that our African women are marrying much later. Parents do not approve of family planning, especially for young girls [. . .]. [T]hey have this idea that a girl who uses contraceptives is likely to become a prostitute" (Euppa 1971: 11). Euppa's words were part of a flood of letters and articles that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s in postcolonial Tanzanian newspapers about schoolgirl pregnancies, clandestine abortion, corrupt sugar-daddies, and "dumped babies" (Amelsvoort 1976). And his final words were in close alignment with ideas circulating in vernacular chapbooks in market towns in West Africa (Eric n.d.; Thometz 2001; Hunt 2002). First among the popularly accused were the "leaders of the nation", "VIP's", and "bosses with their sophisticated big cars". They were busy "wandering on streets and girl school compounds'hunting' school girls under the cover of offering lifts" because they thought that they needed "young blood" to keep them young (Mulokozi 1970: 7; Pugi 1970: 7; Mushi 1972: 11). Doctors and parents were not far behind in the finger pointing: "Unscrupulous doctors are obtaining large sums of money from pregnant girls who do not want to have a baby. Some parents encourage abortion on their

daughters because they realize that their daughters will have to give up prospects of education and even of marriage" (Maziku 1974: 5).

2 Since the arrival of structural adjustment policies and "safe motherhood" initiatives in Africa from the late 1980s, there has been greater alertness among public health experts of clandestine, unsafe abortion as a social epidemic, one complicated by neoliberal economic policy, the privatization of health care, and AIDS (Turshen 1999). Class and gender inequalities are intensifying as are "sexual economies" (John & Nair 1998) that rely on the bodies of young women. The vulnerability of teenage girls to botched abortion and preying sugar-daddy figures have become front-page news in the West, more fodder for those moved by images of desperate, poor, and victimized Third World women perhaps, though still an indication of the greater sense of urgency in the global health field about what to do about the high mortality rate from unsafe abortion.

3 On June 3, 1998, the *New York Times'* Howard French (1998) told the story of a nineteen-year-old senior in an Abidjan secondary school. Fernande Ake tried to abort a pregnancy with a concoction of wine, nearly frozen Coca-Cola, and sugar. When this did not work, with the help of her mother, sixty dollars, and some whispered negotiations, Fernande Ake managed to obtain a hushed abortion in a public hospital. A couple of years later, she was pregnant again. This time the abortion–in an undercover abortion clinic–cost only about thirty dollars. Yet it resulted in heavy bleeding, terrible abdominal pains, vaginal discharges, and anguished fears of sterility.

4 Fernande Ake's story enabled a journalistic accounting of facts: according to a World Health Organization report of the mid-1990s, fifty-eight African women were dying a day due to attempts to terminate their pregnancies using homemade cures or in underground, unsafe clinics. Forty percent of the women patients entering Abidjan's Treichville Hospital were arriving due to "traditional" or backstreet abortions, one doctor reported, and sixteen to eighteen percent of those died. Dr. Christiane Welflens, the director of obstetrics at Yopougon University Hospital Center, said that twenty percent of Abidjan women dying during pregnancy were dying from the consequences of clandestine abortion, and those who survived "are condemned to bear heavy consequences for their health far into the future, from sterility to chronic pain, to psychological scars". Clandestine abortion and its toxic effects is, in her words, "the central drama of reproductive health in Africa" (French 1998). During the same twenty-five year period when abortion drama moved from national African newspapers to the *New York Times,* a substantial medical and public health literature has tracked clandestine abortion and its consequences. This literature began by advocating the decriminalization of abortion in Africa. In recent years, it has promoted more compassionate forms of clinical post-abortion care, as if decriminalization might never be achieved, but at least empathy might be[2]. The public health literature is now so large that reviews of this literature have become complicated, time-consuming affairs (Benson *et al.* 1996).

5 Much less well known is the fact that during this same time period, at least five feminist African novels with abortion scenes have appeared: Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* (1984, 1991), Véronique Tadjo's *À vol d'oiseau* (1986), Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987, 1996), 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas' *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (1993), and Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998). Some are more explicitly feminist than others, though all promote positive and liberatory images of women and question the constraints under which women live. This essay *reads* these novels–four written by women and one

by a man (Bandele-Thomas)–*for* terminated pregnancies, examining how abortion scenes are rendered in them. All were published in the 1980s and 1990s.

6 My queries hover around questions like: What kinds of social and semiotic documentation do these novels provide? What does abortion signify within the structure and meaning of each novel? How does authorial choice about an abortion's immediate results–survival or death–enter into this meaning? How are we to account for this metaphorical choice–within each novel and within African novels of the 1980s and 1990s in general–in historical terms? And, how might we move between these historical traces from fiction and a historically astute rendering of reproductive consciousness and self-knowledge among women in postcolonial Africa (Hunt 2005)?

7 This paper also interrogates fictional modes of writing abortion as an initial incision into thinking about the relationships among history and fiction, historical writing and novels, analysis and form. By comparing these novels' modes of writing to that found in the public health literature, it takes up Roland Barthes' (1968: 25) suggestion that "a history of [. . .] modes of writing would [. . .] be the best of social phenomenologies". If abortion is a frequent topic in African feminist novels, historians should wonder why. They should also wonder how we can make the relationship between history and fiction a productive one, moving thoughtfully if along a crooked path from the social and semiotic traces of fiction toward a historical rendering of the experience and "culture of abortion" (de Blécourt 1999; Fisher 1999) in Africa.

8 The boundaries among fictional storytelling, history, and historical narration have been blurred for some time now. And so it always will be. Recent debates about relationships among "the real", the historical, and the fictional have reminded historians that formal choices are integral to historical writing. If Hayden White (1987) and Natalie Zemon Davis (1987) popularized these ideas among anglophone historians, Paul Veyne (1971) and Paul Ricœur (1983, 1984, 1985) led the way in France and among francophone readers. The implications of thinking about the relationship between time, history, and narrative have too often been limited to some version of the "revival of narrative" in history, famously signaled in these precise terms by Lawrence Stone (1979). Though such a revival has been compellingly demonstrated by early modernist microhistorians (Ginzburg 1993)[3], the relevant theoretical literature has made at least some historians–including several of modern Africa–much more aware of shape, figuration, and authorial positionality[4].

9 Most historians are familiar with how the early modern French historian, Natalie Davis (1987) sought out "fiction in the archives", by examining how the authors of letters seeking royal pardons shaped their accounts of these crimes into stories drawing on the fictive features of their times. This paper inverts Davis' gesture. It reads fiction for archives. It asks how novels disclose history–history as social process, and history as forms of remembering. While the documentary, indeed ethnographic value of these novels as descriptions and imaginings of the social and the subjective is of interest, so are their formal properties. Hayden White's (1987) comparisons between nineteenth century realist novels and historical narratives sent shockwaves through the historical profession, worried about the implications for a "postmodern", non-objective turn in historical writing (Appleby, Hunt & Jacob 1994). Yet his vocabulary for poetics–the tragic, comic, epic, and the like (White 2001)–is not as useful for thinking about what either modernist or late twentieth century fiction might mean for new historical writing as that yielded by the lexicon of structuralist, narratological analysis: order and duration, frequency, mood, and voice (Genette 1980).

10 These novels provide not just new evidence and ideas for historians, but new forms. If the idea is not only to *mine* novels for their ethnographic descriptions, but also to *mime* their figures and forms, narratological fluency may help the historian to see more clearly the wealth of possibilities for constituting a complex set of relationships among what happened (the story to be told), the text that one writes (the narrative), and the shifting positioning of oneself as a character or narrator mediating among the story, the narrative, and the figurative, imagined reader.

11 Such an analysis is quite different from the usual kind of hermeneutic readings that historians perform. Uncharacteristic questions stream in, questions about the relation of part to whole, narrative positioning within the text, differences and conflations among the voices and viewpoints of the author, narrator, characters, and figurative reader. Especially pertinent matters for the historian about temporal order and duration also emerge. Of particular note is the use of anachronies–discordances between the ordering of the story and the ordering of the narrative, between what happened and how it is told–as a possible way to disrupt the linearity of homogeneous, empty time, never mind the assumption that chronology is the best way to organize historical knowledge. I draw on these issues to suggest how historians might read novels not as texts reflecting African social realities, not as texts substituting for social scientific description, but as constitutive objects whose forms comprise complex accounts of self-knowledge and remembrance.

12 There is also a history that is waiting to be written about girls seeking modernity in Africa and knotted links among this seeking, fantasy and desire, and their resorting to abortion in Africa. Induced abortion flies in the face of the premium that social scientists have long assumed that Africans place on the wealth of people, on the fertility of men and women. These novels can do productive work for historians by forcing us to grapple in new ways with exceptions to this putatively ancient African social logic, "health is wealth is fertility". This paper asks: Isn't it time that we rethink this logic (which comes through so strongly in a key source for ancient African historical narratives, epics) as always some mixture of fact and fantasy, the social, the ideological, and the desired?

13 The paper proceeds by counterpoint. First, it provides a brief review of the social scientific literature on abortion, which was until quite recently a literature emerging from the fields of medicine and public health and where anthropologists have only recently begun to make their mark. Then, it takes up a much closer reading of five novels *as artifacts:* sources of new evidence embedded in complex narrative forms. The contrast is uneven. The social scientific literature is given shorter shrift, and it does not receive the same attention to form. Yet the point is *not* to set up "a real" and then fill it in with illustrative texture from the novels. Rather, it is to show how much the novels *tell,* while implicitly posing a set of questions that the social scientific literature has not even begun to *ask*. The paper concludes by asking what a history of abortion in Africa might look like in relation to these different modes of writing abortion, and in turn what these modes of writing might tell us about new ways of *writing* history.

Abortion in the Medical and Social Sciences

14 In the mid-1960s, the incidence of induced abortion in Africa appeared to be low (Corsa 1967). No less of an influential demographer than John Caldwell (1966) suggested that abortion was rarely performed in Africa. Medical reports emerged slowly, first from South Africa (Scher 1963) and then in 1968 from Nigeria. Tetanus due to "criminal abortion" was seen in Lagos, where "14-57% of all gynecological admissions" were related

to "illegal abortions" induced by herbs, douching, or mechanical means (Akinla 1970a, 1970b). Dr. D. A. Ampofo (1969, 1970a, 1970b) began reporting on abortion-related maternal deaths in Accra's major hospital, where abortion patients occupied over half of the 76 beds in the Obstetrics and Gynecology ward. Sepsis, hemorrhage, tetanus, and perforation of the uterus were the most common complications, and in 1969, there were nine abortion-related deaths. Those who admitted to procuring abortions said they did so because they wished to complete school or training; or because it was an unwanted pregnancy; or because an already existing baby was still too young; or because of being prone to illness during pregnancy; or because due to fearing feared dismissal from work. Of 116 induced abortion cases, 45 went to an abortionist's clinic, 40 were done at home by an abortionist, and 31 were self-induced. Most of the procedures were performed without anesthesia, either by a surgical instrument or by using pieces of particular twigs. Oral abortifacients included particular drugs sold for menstrual disorders, as well as sugar, alcohol, washing blue, purgatives, and large doses of salicylates.

15 By 1970, the expression "procured abortion", rather than "criminal abortion", had become common among experts drawing attention to the problem. Ampofo's main counterpart in Nigeria, Dr. J. B. Akingba, argued that pregnant schoolgirls should not be expelled and that legalized abortion should be introduced and made available to all women. The consequences of procured abortion included suffering, wasted time, loss of future educational opportunity, future infection and disease, and death (Akingba & Gbajumo 1970). By 1973, the International Planned Parenthood Federation organized a Conference on Medical and Social Aspects of Abortion in Africa in Accra, Ghana. Case reports on women dying from induced abortion in Cameroon and Zaire were included, as was evidence from surveys in Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast indicating women were resorting to abortion for ill-timed pregnancies and due to a strong preference for maintaining at least three years between births. Of the 11 maternal deaths at Kinshasa's Mama Yemo Hospital in 1972, four were the direct result of "criminal abortions" (Pauls 1973). The Accra Conference participants concluded that legal restrictions inhibited research on abortion practices, epidemiology, and motivations, and that abortion laws should be liberalized (Abortion in Africa 1974). Such appeals continued. The criminality of abortion was not preventing abortion; instead, it was often performed by unskilled personnel in unsanitary conditions with a large risk of complications, and then those suffering complications usually delayed in seeking medial help (Ojo 1974).

16 Thus, the problem went from one of virtual ignorance in 1965 to crisis proportions, as if overnight. There were two mini-explosions of research and concern. One came just after independence when the first generation of African obstetricians and gynecologists began to speak out about their caseloads in large, tertiary urban hospitals. This crisis was complemented by moral outcries in newspapers and from the mid-1960s in vernacular pulp fiction, too. Speedy Eric's (n.d.) (Thometz 2001: 220-221) chapbook, *Mabel the Sweet Honey that Poured Away,* was in circulation in Ontisha. Readers were drawn into Mabel's story with racy passages about her first forays with arousal and seduction, as a girl of twelve within her mother's popular restaurant. Mabel became a hotel prostitute in Port Harcourt after rejecting married life and ended up aborting a pregnancy of three months with "contraceptives and overdose too" inside the hotel lavatory, while "music was going on merrily in the bar [. . .]. Inside the lavatory our old sweet honey was pouring away". The story ends with the words: "The blood flowed freely unchecked, by about four thirty

the last drop that held her together flowed away. And she collapsed [sic] and died. THE END."

17 The second explosion came about the same time as AIDS, as social scientists and epidemiologists finally discovered sugar-daddies–long after African novelists had–and as the adolescent pregnancy crowd and even the *New York Times* found evidence for the sexual vulnerability of teenage girls in abortion statistics. By 1993, abortion was recognized as a major aspect of the "social dynamics of adolescent fertility" in Africa. Caroline Bledsoe and Barney Cohen (1993) reported that due to abortion's illegality in most African countries, doctors and health workers were known to intervene so as to initiate an abortion yet then instructed the patient to go to a hospital for the abortion to be completed. Most young women at risk for unsafe abortions are unmarried, many are unemployed or underemployed, and many are keen to not let a pregnancy necessitate dropping out of school. Many try to accomplish abortions as cheaply as possible, and many postpone taking action, increasing the dangers to their health. Problems with paternal recognition, they reported, are also a frequent cause of abortion.

18 Most data on abortion in Africa remains hospital-based (Bledsoe & Cohen 1993). Only recently and then still quite rarely have the social sciences self-consciously deployed technologies of knowledge collection focused on individual narratives. One early exception was Wolf Bleek's (1987) fieldwork. He showed that in Ghana local knowledge of abortion methods was "staggering", though researchers asking about abortion easily became confused with the police. While finding that ten of the nineteen women in one lineage had had an induced abortion and five had had three or more, he discovered that most women lied about past abortions when questioned by clinic nurses assisting with his research.

19 The medical and public health sciences are fields where clarity in numbers carries a high premium, where the messy ethnographic facts of an individual's subjective narrative are avoided, if the technologies of knowledge production even permit them to be revealed. When there are case histories within this literature, the narratives are usually built up out of questions like: How did she get pregnant? How did she arrive at the scene of an abortion? Where was it performed, who did it and with what technologies? What were the sequelae? And did she die? Since the late 1980s, there have been some calls for more qualitative research, as well as for blood and antibiotic supplies to be improved in hospitals to save the lives of those suffering from sepsis, and for vacuum aspiration technology to be introduced to replace the less safe method of dilation and curettage (Coeytaux 1988). Attention has also been drawn to the fact that many women who seek care after an induced abortion are subject to abuse by overworked nurses and doctors, who disapprove of abortion and the actions of their patients (Walker 1996). By the 1990s, case reports were indicating that post-abortion care was too often being managed within hospitals under appalling crisis conditions, with patients with incomplete abortions waiting unattended for many hours to be seen by a physician. The idea that induced abortion was something only sought by unmarried teenage girls has been demythologized. The widespread and deadly use of antimalarials as abortafacients has also become common knowledge (Baker & Khasiani 1992). Notable is Elisha Renne's (1996) (Hunt 2005) anthropological work in Nigeria. Questioning assumptions about fertility desire and contraceptive use, she showed that in local female speech, abortion is not a deadly and stark opposite of birth. Sharing case histories from several young women, she instead demonstrated the ordinariness of the experience, its relationship to age-old

practices of menstrual regulation, the typical kinds of medicines and technologies used, and the ways that inducing abortion is disassociated from morals or a sense of crisis[5].

20 Worsening economic conditions in some countries in the wake of structural adjustment have led to a perception that risky forms of induced abortion are on the rise, though these causal links have not been systematically studied. The spate of grim abortion stories within novels to which we now turn, however, suggests a greater popular awareness of abortion-related deaths from the mid-1980s, thus at about the same time that the effects of neoliberal economic policy began to seep into daily life.

Novels as Artifacts

21 I consider these novels as not just found but manufactured evidence, as artifacts, whose construction deserves attention. In this first reading, I move from one artifact to the next, according to the sequence by which they appeared in print. Some of what follows is descriptive, so that readers have a strong sense of these novels. Liberal quotation is used to display the writing of abortion in these texts, while it is narratological interjections about voice, duration, anachrony, and temporal effects and distortions that are key to much of the analysis that will follow.

Artifact 1: *Le Baobab fou,* 1984

22 Ken Bugul's 1984 autobiographical novel is set in 1970s Brussels[6]. The main character is one of the first Senegalese women to migrate to Europe, to a strongly Catholic country where abortion was illegal. She seeks an abortion to free herself from a white Belgian boyfriend, Louis, who idealizes her *as Africa* and who wants to bind her in marriage and to a life together in Senegal. The voice is an autobiographical "I" that moves in and out of memories and the present, though occasionally giving voice to the abortionist doctor's remembered and hostile words. His waiting room is full of other immigrant women of color: "I'd sooner have called it a recruitment office where women of all colors were lined up [. . .]. We were there together without being together [. . .]. There wasn't a single man in this waiting room, which resembled the anteroom of a brothel" (1991: 43). The doctor immediately asks her if the father is white or black. When she says white, he evokes degenerationist logic to condemn this pregnancy of mixture as unfit to survive. She names him an "executioner" (1991: 44), and his racialist logic produces "false guilt" (1991: 47). Visceral feelings of nausea for Louis, for his white skin, for twisted colonial desires, not the doctor's repulsive words, compel her.

23 The abortion-related scenes are substantial in duration, and the act represents a pivotal breaking with her colonized past and being. A few days after the interview at the doctor's office, he comes to her residence to perform the operation. While it is her loathing for the Belgian boyfriend and his eroticized, racial idealizations that brings about her deed of cutting out and halting, the abortion permits a coming to terms with her colonial education and desires. It produces anguish *and* a postcolonial, "feminist consciousness" (1991: 50). Colonialism, she comes to see, was an "alienation of a third dimension, both fascinating and hideous" (1991: 51). So, too, was the abortion in this city of exile. Feeling not unlike a "dismembered construction site", she walks through Brussels' "somber streets [. . .] stones everywhere" (1991: 48). Memories of her teen years in Senegal when she longed to date white men, when she first admired and encountered a Frenchman, leave her feeling disappointed with herself, as if she is still searching for an impossible dream. Her feelings are mixed with retrospective flashes to when her mother painfully lost a newborn son (she "whimpered but did not cry. She became motionless") and to when her own grandmother shunned her because she had become a colonial schoolgirl

("Afterward, she hated me, regarded me as a blemish; I disgusted her" [1991: 46]). Anticipating the operation: "Everything came back [. . .]. Descartes [. . .], Charlemagne [. . .] the French school" (1991: 47). So, too, did a realization that her grandmother's anger had brought her "into this anonymous street" (1991: 46). In the end, the link between novel's sub-plot about abortion and its larger message about the legacy of colonialism is ambiguous: the abortion represents an abrupt personal ending to her colonial past, and an equally abrupt occasion when she comes to a new point of self-realization about her own internal colonization. At the same time, its brutality says much about her new location of exile, about the ambivalent existential position of being a postcolonial, especially a female postcolonial, in exile in Europe.

Artifact 2: *À vol d'oiseau,* 1986

24 Véronique Tadjo's *À vol d'oiseau,* first published in 1986, is a series of vignettes, dream sequences, and flashbacks[7]. A young African woman falls in love with the husband of a wealthy white couple with children while living with them in another European city of stone. They begin a clandestine affair. Soon the house is sold, and the wife gets a divorce settlement and the children. But it was a "sordid affair" from the beginning; all that remains is "the tension, this floating lie" (2001: 4). The African woman leaves–at first for the ghettos, parks, graffiti, ghetto-blasters, and enormous ice-creams of Washington D.C. "There are no frontiers" (2001: 9), the novel suggests, in travel, wealth, and inequality.

25 The second chapter (of twenty-one) contains one vignette. It is the first to take the reader to Africa, to Abidjan's streets, to muddy Marcory poto-poto, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Akissi's abortion emerges almost as if one in a series of street images, not unlike other images of a child with a snotty nose, paralyzed taxis, a dog with scabies. The passage moves from one image that "I" sees to the next. Then, attention shifts, though through a more neutral narrator's voice, to Akissi. It is she who undergoes a backstreet abortion. Akissi has a name, but otherwise is an anonymous figure representing the banalities of misery in an African city. Her abortion occurs in a building near an old sawmill. All that is required is to give crumpled bills to an unidentified man.

26 The nurse in this novel is male, a nurse of the quarter who "had proved to be quite incompetent. He had promised her that the injections would return her body to its normal state but nothing had happened" (2001: 12). Instead, Akissi asked for advice from a friend who sent her to a makeshift clinic. The full waiting room of waiting young women recalls the abortion scene in Brussels in *Le Baobab fou*[8]. It is a shack erected in the middle of a disused sawmill. You can still smell sawdust floating in the air. The city sounds seem to resonate from far away. She puts her hand in her pocket and clutches the borrowed money tightly in her fingers. She will not need to speak to the man. All she has to do is hand over the bundle of crumpled notes [. . .]. Around her the faces of the waiting women are stony masks. She sits down. When her turn comes, she gets up without a word.

"She cannot see very well. The room looks dirty. She is assailed by the smell of blood. The freshness of the harmattan has faded. The man's hands are moist and precise.
The pain is blinding. Profound. She gets up. Her head reels. She throws up.
Muddy, muddy Marcory. I see the neighborhood gangs. These boys have already turned into men. Their names are Hendrix, Pepito, Johnny, and they have a small band" (2001: 12-13).

27 The abortion scene seems to be a mere interjection within this novel about growing up, learning about broken promises, the lingering traces of twisted passion, and the cruelties of inner city African life. Abortion is an everyday, terrible scene of the city, part of the texture of misery. We learn little about Akissi, only that she must hide her pregnancy:

"Being pregnant is not something she had contemplated. It is too late now. In the compound she has to ignore the women's probing eyes. These do not bother her as much as her mother's penetrating glare that pierces her thoughts and invades her sleep. Every day she can feel her breasts swelling, her whole body transforms. She has become a different person. She does not understand this thing, which has lodged itself in her, draining all her energies. She is not ready for this" (2001: 12).

28 Akissi's abortion is one of several separate but linked vignettes that speak together to girls, concealment and secrecy, and memories that do not wear out. The central character and the narrator are ambiguously distinct. Neither seems to be Akissi, though even this remains unclear. The distortions in order and time are so extreme in this novel that one is never sure what is a layer of autobiographical memory and what is a fresh event. It is unclear who the father of Akissi's pregnancy is, for example, though one upscale sugar-daddy and several tough gangster figures come and go. Akissi survives her abortion, we imagine, and she has a counterpart of sorts, we will see, a young girl who is tempted by the candies and kisses of a sugar-daddy into a bougainvilla-laden path.

29 First, however, another vignette more explicitly returns to the consequences of the illegality of abortion. It is a hospital scene of women suffering from botched clandestine abortions performed outside its doors: "Abortions are illegal. You will get to learn. Young girls, muttering inaudible words, contort their bodies on the hospital floor. One of them looks especially young. When a male nurse passes in the corridor, 'her groans grow louder'" (2001: 23). She is young enough to be the school girl of the sugar-daddy scene and young enough to be Akissi, though no narrative links are ever made specifying that Akissi's backstreet abortion landed her in the hospital. The neglect of these patients within the hospital, however, stands as a searing critique of the fact that abortion is criminalized and stigmatized.

30 Almost all of the street images are bleak, and each of these vignettes is part of the way the novel becomes a "story of misery recount[ing] itself" (2001: 22). Implicitly, the space of the hospital is compared with the space for begging before a bakery. A homeless old man beggar begs daily from the bakery's customers. One day a young street child arrives and plants himself like a young mango tree in the old man's space. Exasperated, the old man approaches with threatening cries and violent gestures. The old man hits the boy, and the child runs away in front of a car, brakes screeching, though the boy is not hit. The next morning the boy comes again, holding out his hands for bits of warm bread. When the boy goes to sleep that night inside empty cardboard boxes, the old man approaches this sleeping form with a piece of wood, hitting the boy quickly and powerfully until his breathing is no more.

31 The apparent sequence, therefore, takes the readers from a sordid love affair in France, followed by flight to racial and wealth disparities in America's District of Columbia, to Marcory poto-poto and attempts at backstreet abortions, to more muddy streets and an old beggar eliminating a young, deaf competitor. Soon–after references to this being "a sterile century" where even "love is finding it hard to thrive" (2001: 31), after memory clips of broken promises and a lover who does not return–the novel releases the scene

that provides its title, *As the crow flies,* and where for a brief moment misery does seem to end.

"His house was at the end of the neighborhood, at the end of a bougainvillaea-bordered alley [. . .]. She knew the way by heart. She had walked that way several times, straight from school when the daylight had not yet begun to fade and her absence had not as yet begun to worry anybody.

It was always the same: once inside, he would lock the door and undo her hair.

'You look like Mamy Wata' he would whisper to her, 'you know, the water goddess. At nightfall, she comes from her queendom and seduces all the men she meets. Those who follow her are engulfed by the tides.'

He would then ask her to lie down and pull up her blue and white uniform. He would then lie next to her.

'Here, suck this sweet and then kiss me.'

In the darkness of the room, she forgot the world outside; the school, her friends, and the games they played. Yet she sometimes wondered whether he had lied the other day when he promised to change himself into a bird and fly to her when night fell. She had waited in her bedroom in vain.

That afternoon it rained. You could hear the drops on the roof like a repetitive note of a xylophone. The air was dense. He asked her to take off all her clothes. When she was completely naked, he kissed her several times. He caressed her hair. Then he remained silent. Finally, he spoke in a low voice.

'I can't. You are too young.'

She raised herself on her elbows and jutted her head forward.

'Too young for what?' She yelled at him. 'For what?'" (2001: 33-34).

32 This is the novel's sugar-daddy scene and canonical in its benign innocence it is. Is this naïve schoolgirl a younger version of the main character, the one who moves globally between France, DC, and Abidjan? Could she be Akissi, too? Regardless, we suddenly cross a class boundary within Abidjan to a place of flowering trees and light, where the girl in question wears and takes off her school uniform. This scene offers up the classic meaning of the term sugar-daddy. He gives her candies, and she learns that he can lie.

33 Who is the "I" of the book? The voice and angle of vision are never clear. Narrative order is also disturbed, as if "I" is in a daydream that cuts back and forth among involuntary memories. At moments, we are brought inside Akissi's sensations–feeling she must hide, that she is not ready, and recalling what others told her. But it is the ambiguous "I"–part narrator, part character, perhaps part figurative reader too–who sees Akissi in the scene in Marcory poto-poto, who develops the joined ideas of the city as a sensory space wrestling with agonies and of a story of misery that should be told (2001: 22-23).

34 We can link together the three separate scenes analytically and see that they all hover around the themes of medical and sexual risk, girlhood, and secrecy, that they provide a powerful critique of the ways African schoolgirls and city girls become pregnant and then the conditions under which they end these pregnancies. But the critique must be pieced together from fragments that defy sequence and a unitary subject. Akissi is any scared pregnant African girl, just as the girl with candy is any African schoolgirl, and either might end up writhing from a neglect heightened by stigma in a hospital ward.

Artifact 3: *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée,* 1987

35 A recent article by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002: 1337-38), a demographic anthropologist of educated Beti women in Cameroon, speaks of abortion as a "lesser shame [. . .] within a local system of honor" "a code of honorable self-possession" within the domain of "intended and well-managed motherhood". Among these educated women, abortion is a conscious choice that enables maintaining honor in the face of an "ill-wrought entry into the social status of *mother*". This theme of honor and shame comes through most strongly in Calixthe Beyala's first and perhaps best novel, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987, 1996), where it is the lack of a recognizable father that leads a young pregnant prostitute named Irene to seek a clandestine abortion[9].

36 Irene dies, bleeding to death, though Irene is not the main character. Her abortion is seen through the eyes of her friend, Ateba, who is coming to terms with being the daughter of a prostitute and an inevitable sexual object herself in a mean, sordid, objectifying world where men misuse and molest women. Ateba is nineteen, no longer attending school, and living as a foster daughter and house maid in her aunt's home, a space of hatred, servitude, and sexual risk.

37 Ateba is becoming aware of her confused sexuality and feminist desires amid violent sexual scenes with a male tenant in her "aunt"–madam's household. And her dear friend, Irene, is the closest reminder she finds of her lost mother, Betty. When Irene becomes pregnant, she

"takes a handkerchief out of her bag, wipes her eyes, noisily blows her nose, and says in a feeble voice that she doesn't know what to do, that she can't bear the thought of having a kid without a father, that she'd rather die. Ateba gives her a sidelong glance and vaguely suggests an abortion. After all, what does one kid's life matter in this country where everything is constantly in an embryonic state" (1996: 88-89)?

38 "Bastard" is the same word by which Ateba herself was taunted as a prostitute's child, and it is Ateba who proposes the abortion to Irene. Ateba is fiercely opposed to the purging properties of traditional plants, the emmenagogue technologies of menstrual regulation that Elisha Renne (1996; van de Walle & Renne 2001) has explored so well. She expressly prefers the seemingly more violent methods of modern medicine for her friend, in contrast to those used by her own mother (Betty) who she knows regularly brought on her menstrual periods through herbal purges.

> "Ateba accompanied Irene home. Then she wandered around the QC for a long time looking for a solution. She ended up finding three kinds of purges, all made from plants, which Betty used to take herself to bring her menses on. But it wasn't what she wanted. Ateba wanted something more radical, something that would tear out of her friend what man had wrought there, and besides she no longer wanted a traditional remedy–never again" (Beyala 1996: 90).

39 Ateba helps Irene find the Gynecology Clinic at the city hospital, and a midwife closes her normal consultations to fit Irene into her busy day. Ateba's longing for her mother combines with affection for this young friend about to undergo an abortion. Abortion and homoerotic desire come together quite literally on the same hospital bench: Ateba wants to protect Irene, even kiss her, but this desire (not unlike the abortion, it is implied) is "a sin".

> "In the space of a moment, Ateba takes in all of these bellies before her eyes close in on Irene. She sees her braided black sandals, her slender legs coming from underneath her pink skirt, which is slit at the sides, her breasts inside a tight-fitting white tee-shirt, her neck, her mouth. She wants that mouth, despite the exhaustion which pulls at its corners. She wants to give her a long kiss a queen's kiss which

> she'll enclose in her crown to put her in a place safe away from false encounters. She moves one hand forward, she wants to put it on Irene's knee, she's trembling, her body tells her this is a sin, her blood tells her this is a sin, her entire being tells her this is a sin [. . .]" (1996: 107)[10].

40 The abortion scene is the most ethnographically elaborated of the five novels, and it is also the most strongly wedded to the space of a modern clinic. It takes place clandestinely, though within a major urban hospital.

> "The gynecology department. On the left there are rooms cram-full of pregnant women at term and shrieking. On the right, a large bay window, a dirty backdrop. At the back, there are long benches holding a motley crew of pregnant women and smelling of blood. When ten o'clock strikes, all the nurses are snoozing and those who're not dozing off are getting high on beer. As for the head nurse, every ten minutes she opens the canary door and thunders: 'Next!'" (1996: 106).

41 A female nurse-midwife who works there, and is portrayed as accustomed to being won over with beer by scheming patients, performs the operation between other appointments.

> "The canary door opens to show a woman with a round and oily face, middle-aged, not particularly pleasant, with small eyes that haven't looked much further than the ceiling about her head. She's in charge and you can see it in the terror she inspires, in the respect she summons, and above all in the papers and the pencils that are sticking out of her pocket.
> 'Next!'
> Irene rises. Ateba does likewise.
> 'You're together?' the matron questions them in a cold tone.
> Irene nods affirmatively. Before closing the door again, the head nurse tosses a 'Consultation ended. Come back tomorrow!' at those women still huddling on the benches.
> A murmur of protest from among the big-bellied ones. Offended face of the head nurse. The door slams shut [. . .]. She goes down to her desk that takes up the entire side of a wall and sits down. 'I'm listening', she says crossing her legs over her thighs. Irene takes two timid steps forward, intimidated by the white blouse and the framed diplomas. She's looking at her feet or maybe the nurse's legs, she's cracking her fingers.
> 'I came to see you three days ago. I'm pregnant.'
> 'Date of your last menstrual period?'
> 'I think it was the fifteenth of last month. I'm not sure. But [. . .].'
> 'Did you bring what you need?'
> 'Yes.' She takes out some banknotes which she gives to the head nurse who hurriedly makes them disappear in the pocket of her blouse.
> 'Get undressed and lie down on the table. You', she addresses Ateba, 'wait outside'" (1996: 108-109).

42 Irene is dead by morning–in her own bed, under her mother's care. This abortion death–the loss of Ateba's mother reduplicated–is a climax that releases, even propels Ateba into action. For the first time, she acts as if she herself is a prostitute: she makes a sexual contract with a man in a bar. Yet any following of a maternal script ends there. As soon as she feels trapped by him, feminist anger and violent desire combine. The abortion-death of her friend unleashes man-hating rage in the form of murder. Ateba smashes his skull to pieces.

43 While much of the social scientific literature tries to interrogate social categories of women who seek induced abortions and their motivations, none of it comes near the kinds of street images of an African urban slum or *bidonville* as found in Tadjo and Beyala's novels. Whereas Tadjo's tack is elusive and modernist, a gently kaleidoscopic bevy of spare images and anachronies that suspend any possibility of a sure narrative sequencing, Beyala's novel is weighed down by its linear and sordid realism. The grimness of girlhood is paralleled by the shocking aggression of her unrelenting fury. Ultimately Ateba's story calls upon an abortion scene–the death of a prostitute friend from such an operation–as a pivotal moment enabling the self-realization of this trapped foster daughter and servant girl, prey to her Madam and to a male tenant. Her self-awareness is achieved not through one but two deaths, that of Irene and that of the man she kills. The result is an audaciously and violently feminist novel. This feminism is no simple Western bourgeois import; this violent feminism knows a hatred borne of the spaces of this African city, including her aunt-Madam's house. Central to the novel are spaces and senses–the congestion, smells, street fights, and psychic violences–of this African urban slum known as QC. Taxi drivers mockingly refuse to enter the quarter's streets, which murmur of grim girlhoods and sexual violence. The days and imaginations of teenage girls hover between households and bars, between demeaning work under a foster madam (Ateba is exploited as a servant but must obey like a daughter) and the more alluring possibility of selling one's body in dancehalls.

44 The novel evokes the ambiguities of sex, desire, sin. The loss and pain of the abortion is less Irene's than Ateba's. This abandoned daughter is living as a "daughter"-though-housemaid with her authoritarian aunt in a bleak Douala *bidonville,* an urban shantytown, so nicknamed in francophone Africa after its cheap roofs made from recycled old barrels *(bidons)*. It is Ateba, who through Irene's experiences, remembers her own shame as a bastard child of a prostitute, a child who might well have been aborted and who once more loses a sexualized mother figure to the tawdry squalor of a city.

45 Neither Ateba nor Irene is a naïve schoolgirl, and there are no sugar-daddies here. And this is the least backstreet of all the clandestine, illicit abortions found in these novels. The abortionist is a nurse and the clinic is not a makeshift place, though the nurses are paid off in beer and drink on the job. The voice of the nurse emerges clearly. She complains about how hard she works, how little she is paid, while simultaneously suggesting the righteousness of nursing and the appeal of doing clandestine abortion work: "They don't realise! I've been working since dawn. I haven't had a minute to catch my breath. It is almost eleven o'clock. And for nothing but a few pennies. It's out of the goodness of my heart that I keep on doing this job. One day, heaven will thank me" (1996: 108).

Artifact 4: *The Sympathetic Undertaker,* 1991

46 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas' *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (1993) is a novel about youth and madness in Nigeria[11]. The principal protagonist is a split subject named Rayo whose brother, Kayo, is worried that he (Rayo) is going mad. Rayo is an active, outspoken, charismatic, and tormented rebel figure who gets himself into trouble with the authorities and writes poetic, anguished, politicized diary entries. Rayo first sneers at canon as a young boy, when he insists that he wants to watch his own circumcision in the local hospital where his mother takes him for this surgery. He rebels and mocks more dangerously in boarding school against the racketeering authority of an obese bully of a student who reads pornographic comics and extorts funds from his peers. Later, as a

university student, Rayo makes a subversive, public speech scorning the state and the state's men. This rebellion lands him in prison, where his body is tortured. By the time we meet him to witness this series of flashbacks, he has a lover named Tere.

47 Tere used to be Kayo's girlfriend, but now she is Rayo's. They make wonderful, mutually orgasmic love. He adores her smell. And, as a part of their companionate, egalitarian, hot romance, he accepts as if effortlessly that she also has a sugar-daddy who pays her school fees, buys her clothes, and wants to give her a baby. Tere does become pregnant, and with hardly a thought for her sugar-daddy's wishes goes for a backstreet abortion. The abortion kills her. By this time, Rayo's madness is alarming his mother who again is alerting Kayo, while rushing back and forth trying to find help for her son from a local, urban healer woman. As the novel closes, we learn that Kayo *is* Rayo. The brothers have not two bodies but one.

48 This is not Tere's first sugar-daddy nor is it her first abortion. She hid her previous sugar-daddy from her former steady boyfriend, a law student on campus, and she tried to hide her abortion from him, too: "I discovered that I was pregnant. I did the next logical thing: I had an abortion. It was a quick one, no complications. After a few days I was all right again. Physically, that is. Emotionally, I was in shreds. I had these spells of acute depression. There wasn't anybody I could turn to" (1993: 26-27). The latest sugar-daddy buys her clothes, flew her to London the summer before, is older than her father's elder brother, has been paying her school fees, is taking her to France this year, and wants Tere to give him a baby.

49 A devoted diaphragm user, Tere pays no attention when she misses her period and is almost three months pregnant before she realizes it. She heads straight for the sugar-daddy's place, and he guesses immediately. She pleads with him to help her get rid of her pregnancy; her final law exams are coming up in two months. He instead wants to know where she wants to have the baby–Paris? London? New York?

> "Did I think he was just one of those *acting big-men* who go all over the place trying to impress with peanuts in their wallets? He told me–as if I didn't know–I deal in millions [. . .]. I have houses, villas, suites and even estates in over twenty countries [. . .]. I know your law degree means a lot to your family. I know that, but for goodness' sake, give me some credit for magnanimity: I'll take care of them all!" (1993: 191).

50 His refusal to help combines with Tere's discovery that this big man of millions drugged her into unconsciousness one night in order to "rape" her (the words are hers), so much did he want to defeat her diaphragm.

51 Tere goes to her boyfriend for help. Rayo/Kayo has no money, but knows someone who will do an abortion on IOU terms, a former medical student who failed his finals and now owns a big drugstore in town: "But in matters of this sort he had an unbeaten record for efficiency and success. His fees came quite high, but he performed his job without asking awkward questions" (1993: 192). His makeshift operating theater is situated in a small office at the back of the drugstore building, and Rayo/Kayo is told to wait in an outer room.

> "Two hours later he came out diffidently, still holding the scalpels. His hands were shaking and he was sweating profusely. He stood by the door, unable to meet my eyes [. . .]. As far as the police were concerned, it was an open-and-shut case. No doubt the IOU man had expended a little of his fortune in greasing palms and seeing officers [. . .] that day of the unceasing blood" (1993: 192-193).

52 Tere's story is not the classic one of the social science literature. She was neither schoolgirl[12] nor street girl, and she used birth control. Tere was not an innocent, unsuspecting schoolgirl duped by an older man, like Akissi's counterpart. Nor was she a housemaid or street girl, for whom selling sex represented one of the only ways to eek out a better living, like Ateba and Irene. She was a university law student in her final year–perhaps as old as 25–an aspiring barrister, leading a dual life to get ahead: "I feel like that–I feel like I'm living a lie. Life is tough [. . .] it's bloody unfair [. . .]. It's not my fault that my family is poor" (1993: 189). The sugar-daddy was the most upscale of possibilities, part of a jet-set, billionaire crowd. She was using him, and he was determined to get her pregnant anyway, to control her reproductive capacity and perhaps cut into her independence. Tere may have died of abortion, though she also died of a drug-induced rape, of the use of scalpels on a well-developed pregnancy.

53 Though readers learn how much Tere wanted the abortion, for Rayo/Kayo, through whose boyfriend eyes we see this abortion death, the event signifies the "politics of [. . .] zany, mindless violence [. . .] this gross corruption that's wrapped around our heads" (1993: 193-194). These abortion events are soon paralleled in Rayo's diary notes by the story of the delivery of a stillborn baby from the womb of the wife of another even bigger bully and extortionist than the boarding school variety, the sinister head of state of the African postcolony of "Zowabia". He is fond of referring to his enemies and critics as "intellectual abortions, these endless hordes of would-be coup-makers" (1993: 137), as that "lecher! That infinitesimal abortion!" (1993: 139). The novel suggests a complex postcolonial moral imagination, and in good measure through these doubled, inverted forms of spoiled fertility and distorted wealth.

54 Tere comes and goes from the novel almost as quickly as the head of state's wife. Yet this casualty of a pregnant schoolgirl is ever pragmatic, spirited, and sensual. Apparently, she is in control of her own sexuality, her own body, her own fertility: but the raw fact is that she dies from a backstreet abortion. Her death is a medium expressing the violence of the state, the corruption of daily life, and the dangerous ways women are coping to survive; and it adds to the boyfriend's intensifying politicization, isolation, and madness.

Artifact 5: *Butterfly Burning,* 1998

55 Yvonne Vera's fourth novel, *Butterfly Burning* (1998), is a historical novel, set in colonial Bulawayo of the 1940s and 1950s[13]. The novel moves between vivid street images of a Bulawayo shantytown in the 1950s and dreamlike visions and imaginings of a young woman's interior, reaching out, observing, searching for a self, as Phephelaphi gets entangled with an older man into whose life she enters, as if a Mami Wata seductress: "Butterflies break from disused Raleigh bicycle bells" (1998: 2). The political edge is seeringly sharp; there is no mistaking the violence of colonial racism in Southern Rhodesia at the time and the way its marks lives, bodies, and aspirations. Fumbatha is a complex character whose father was hung from a tree in the rebellious and violent year of 1896, the same year he was born.

56 Part of the violence lies in the irony of Phephelaphi's desire to become respectable, to rise out of the squalor of this shantytown through becoming a colonial nurse. This aspiration is tied to her wish to separate her identity from her overly possessive and controlling lover and companion, who is himself a victim of colonial racism yet colonizes her being with his fantasies of who she should be within his life. She applies to nursing school secretly, and when she is accepted, she does not tell him. Soon she is pregnant. If she

follows through with the pregnancy, she will be unable to go to nursing school and she will remain under his reins.

57 Again, she keeps a secret from him, retreating from the city to a quiet spot in a dry and broken landscape at the edge of town where she is alone. She uses the thorn from a bush to abort her own pregnancy. The scene is long and elaborated, comprising an entire chapter and acting as a culmination within the book. It is harrowing and bloody, though dreamlike. She achieves her abortion independently, though partially out of spite. The "agony of her release" is mixed with a "fine limit of becoming" (1998: 99). Within her imagination, the detailed description of the landscape of stunted bushes and thorns just at the edge of the black urban location becomes contrasted with hills of green leaves. If such green had instead been present, the narrator notes, the abortion would not have happened. Instead, spite, fate, and folly combine in this situation of "irreversible harm" (1998: 98). Yet "she dares not look at her own harm" (1998: 99) in this instance of becoming: "her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming which she has ceased suddenly to understand, too light and too heavy. It is she. She embraces it, bracing for the tearing" (1998: 99). She survives.

58 Like Bugul's and Beyala's novels, *Butterfly Burning* has a coming-of-age aspect, where self-determination in relation to a sexual relationship and abortion surface as one. The abortion has implications for Phephelaphi's relationship with Fumbatha, and through it, she is also working out her uneasy relationship with her mother. *Butterfly Burning* is distinct from other novels in that it is the only abortion that takes place outside of clinical care or a makeship clinical setting. Phephelaphi is her own abortionist and her own nurse. But, interestingly, medicine as modernity is a motivating factor within the story. The image that allows her to try to free herself of this man's will, this pregnancy, the foul poverty borne of colonial racism, is that of a nurse in a crisp white uniform. The ironies here are multiple, especially for those who know well the complicated history of the ways African female nurses became conflated with sexual license and promiscuity in colonial Africa (Marks 1994; Bell 1999; Hunt 1999; Thomas 2003) or the more recent history–evident in these novels–of corrupt hospitals where one must pay off staff to receive attention and clandestine, illicit abortions.

59 Yet Phephelaphi's nurse fantasy also does not come true. Fumbatha discovers her act, accuses her of killing their child, while further hurting her by taking up with another woman besides. When she again becomes pregnant by him, this time, in the wake of her wrenching abortion experience, she gives up on nursing school, declaring to herself: "I will NOT"–(have another abortion). Thus, in many ways, this novel transforms the collective meaning of the others by inverting the meanings of nurse and abortion. It provides a historical vision of a time when an abortion was not medicalized and when the image of a brisk nurse operated as an inspiring aspiration for a young woman seeking in this very painful, intimate, interiorized way to exit into something new. Phephelaphi hoped to simultaneously rescue herself from an overbearing man and from base poverty through this respectable vocation promising a modicum of social mobility.

From Fiction to History

60 The subalternist historian Ranajit Guha once wrote a remarkable history of an Indian woman dying after an induced abortion from one "untamed fragment [. . .] the residuum of a dismembered past". In his essay, "Chandra's Death", Guha asked how to "reclaim" this fragment "for history", how to meet the "urge for plenitude [. . .] for more and more linkages to work into the torn fabric of the past" (Guha 1987: 138-139). We would do well

to follow Guha's lead by asking: how might we salvage the abortion fragments from these African novels for history?

61 Yet the arresting ways that some of these novels play with order and duration should caution against Guha's proposed solution, "serialization". He proposed "situating this [one archival] fragment in a series" as a "way of neutralizing the effects of decontextualization" (*ibid.:* 138-139). Serialization may be basic to historicist method, though these novels suggest that there may be other, better ways to render context, plenitude, and the complexities of temporality. Narrative order and chronological order need not always be aligned. Perhaps it is time historians think more about the use of anachrony (Genette 1980) as a way to disrupt narrative expectations and suggest tensions among spaces and subjects, among the past, memory, and the present.

62 The middle three novels presented here stand out as a triad, set in the 1980s and published between 1986 and 1991. Each takes up abortion as a salient figure of gender relations, sexual economies, and scarcity in squalid urban Africa. In two of these three, the character who undergoes the clandestine abortion dies. Calixthe Beyala immerses the reader in the human misery and refuse of Douala's poorest quarters, where the daughter of a prostitute watches a girlfriend who sells her body die of an abortion. 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas' *The Sympathetic Undertaker* uses an abortion death from an unwanted pregnancy to speak to "aborted nations" (McNee 2000) where a sexual economy binds young aspiring professional women to relations with sugar-daddy patrons. The third is more ambiguous, though Véronique Tadjo's *À vol d'oiseau* includes a scene of appalling post-abortion care in an urban hospital.

63 The other two novels stand like contrapuntal bookends to these three. Bugul's *Le Baobab fou,* set in 1970s Brussels (with memory flashes to 1950s Senegal), was the first of the five to appear. It is one of the founding feminist novels to come out of Africa, and it is strongly autobiographical, situated in the European "been-to" context of strongly Catholic Belgium in the 1970s. It has likely inspired other fictional explorations of female subjectivities by African women. The protagonist's pregnancy soon after arriving in Europe provokes a visceral recognition of the meaning of her colonial education and revulsion at the idea of having a child with a white father. She seeks an abortion that releases her from this sense of abjection. The most recently published novel, Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning,* is refreshingly historical, returning the reader to the 1940s and 1950s in southern Rhodesia. The central character secretly self-aborts her first pregnancy with a thorn on a barren landscape in order to begin her nursing training as planned and elude the domineering will of her older, possessive companion.

64 All of these novels offer up a range of motivations, means, and consequences, and they provide diverse ways of rendering consciousness and subjective and social contexts. The complexities of age, generation, and relations–not only women with sexual partners, but daughters with mothers– are revealed as factors that complicate motivations for and experiences of abortion. These novels suggest that if there is a single culture of abortion in Africa, a good part of it amounts to everyone knowing that girls and women die from them everyday, while anyone can locate a clandestine abortion-provider.

65 If we tack back and forth between the abortion scenes of fiction and those of the social and medical sciences, our questions necessarily become more semiotic. The way the signs of aborting girl, prostitute, abortionist, sugar-daddy, and nurse emerge within these two literatures provide fascinating contrasts. When the terrain of abortion is semi- or fully-medicalized, it is one of power and conflict, hiding and secrecy, a critical aspect of the

second economy of health care on much of the continent. The figure of the sugar-daddy remains important to vernacular semiotics, we learn, though only Beyala explores its underside–the more hardcore commercialized sex to which the non-schoolgirl feels forced to resort. These novels, more surprisingly, also complicate our understanding of complicities of the ambivalent figure of the African nurse. *The Sympathetic Undertaker* signifies most strongly at the level of state and global feminist politics, while the abortion-related scenes in Beyala's and Tadjo's novels evoke the ways public health conditions combine with poverty, corruption, and the criminalization of abortion, putting so many young women at risk of death from clandestine, botched abortions and inadequate post-abortion care.

66 Beyala's novel describes most; Tadjo's describes least. Sometimes, as in Tadjo's novel, an abortion scene stands in as one more street image. Sometimes the scene is interiorized as in Bugul's and Vera's novels: the focus becomes the subjectivity of the girl or woman undergoing this removal of a pregnancy. In all of them, these are stories of selves. Benjamin (1968: 88) once said: "The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual." Novels, Naipaul (2000: 16, 36-37) suggests, combine "social knowledge" with "self-knowledge", and first novels often turn to and transform material from the author's "immediate circumstances". Helen Bradford (1995) has shown how Olive Schreiner's likely experience with abortion influenced her fiction. We cannot know why the novels explored here were written or precisely how autobiographical they are, though it is interesting that all four of the women authors wrote their novels at a similar moment in the life cycle–when they were in their late twenties and early thirties[14]. It is also worth remembering, however, that the novel originated as a bourgeois, metropolitan form with "totally different historical co-ordinates" than the tales of a storyteller. As Walter Benjamin (1968: 99) tells us, the first is centered more on remembrance and the meaning of life, the second more on "real life" and the moral of the story.

67 We could say that the historian is able to remain much closer to the storyteller than the novelist. Just in the way that the "traces of the storyteller cling to the story" that she tells, to use Benjamin's (1968: 99) words, a historian can achieve a felicitous and complicated "slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers", including "the layers of retellings". Moreover, the historian need not, quite contrary to Benjamin's suggestion, confine herself to "the pure, colorless light of written history". Nor does the contrast between history and chronicle, explanation and interpretation need to be as stark as Benjamin argued in his "Storyteller" essay. The historian may be "bound to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals", though allegory however masked or elliptical is never far away: "The burden of demonstrable explanation" in fact is often coupled with "interpretation" of the way events "are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world." The "course of the world" may be "by definition outside all real historical categories" (Benjamin 1968: 92-93, 95-97), but it is not necessarily outside the best of histories that combine narrative and analysis.

68 Reading novels can become a way to gain initial entry to expansive, "course of the world" questions. This reading of five African novels with abortion scenes gives us several such questions, questions that social scientists have never thought to pose. What has happened to the social logic of wealth as fertility through the ruptures in African history? Is the resort to induced abortion only some forty years old, and is it a singular decolonizing distortion of an ancient logic that privileged wealth in women and children? Or were there earlier twists and aberrations? And how has the medicalization of women's bodies

and fertility constituted a rupture of its own that has changed the ways women resort to abortion and its risks?

69 We now have about four decades of botched abortions as a social reality –and a leading cause of maternal mortality–in Africa. Historical explanation and contextualization could be focused on explaining this evident epidemic of the postcolonial years alone, while remaining conscious of how lopsided most of the evidence is (since it remains largely hospital-based and thus necessarily related to mishaps, morbidities, and death). Some historian might wish to begin to periodize these forty some years in relation to numbers reported or decriminalization, and in relation to various others shifts, such as: *who* has been earning a living through performing abortion[15]; structural adjustment's effects on health, health services, and the risks that women and girls are willing to take with their bodies; changes in available abortion technologies; alterations in conjugal, sexual, and reproductive economies due to war and civil strife (Jok 1999); and the impact of AIDS or HIV seropositivity on maternal desire and maternal rejection.

70 We also need to think, however, about where vulnerable, eroticized girls, sugar-daddies, and clandestine abortions–as facts and fantasies–came from historically, what they mean, and why they signify so loudly. Part of the answer lies in turning away from those works that have made their way into the African literary canon, like the novels considered here, to vernacular forms of writing, like Speedy Eric's chapbook-like market pamphlet, *Mabel the Sweet Honey that Poured Away.* As Emmanuel Obiechina (1973: 106) pointed out, this was a moral story that did not end "on a rising note of optimism". Rather, "there is no happy ending, no forgiveness and no reconciliation" as the blood of seventeen-year-old Mabel who "wanted fast living" and became a prostitute pours away.

71 As statistics on schoolgirls and backstreet abortions have long suggested, characters like Mabel, Akissi, Tere, and Ateba had few choices. Their abortions may not have been the only kinds available[16], but they were the kinds that were most obviously within their reach. Their forms of resort were structured by class, by the global politics of reproduction, by a history of the disciplining and medicalization of fertility practices in Africa according to new age rhythms and calendars. They were also structured by the history of population planning and fertility control in Africa: none of them turned to menstrual regulation practices and only the university student was using a diaphragm.

72 This reproductive history has entailed new eroticizations of girls and young women. New sexual economies and subjectivities came as part of the baggage of courtship and romantic love, monogamous respectability and camouflaged polygamy, and modern forms of leisure: the "good girls" and "bad girls" of boarding school cultures and popular cultural genres, including African newspaper advice columns and pulp fiction. It is also crucial to keep in mind that abortions did not surge for the first time in the 1960s. Colonial officials and African chiefs intervened to prevent abortion in certain contexts, such as the Meru one that Lynn Thomas has analyzed, where alterations in the timing of female initiation ritual led to large numbers of pre-initiation pregnancies, and where authorities forced earlier initiations upon Meru girls to stop the resulting resort to abortion (Thomas 2003; McKittrick 1999).

73 A long-term perspective, as in Helen Bradford's (1991) excellent history of abortion in South Africa, is important. Induced abortion does not always entail crisis or pathological results, despite the overwhelming emphasis of the social scientific literature. Ken Bugul (1991: 51) notes that there "were ancestral means for getting rid of pregnancies that

might be harmful to an image or a social process". Only recently has such an alternative perspective begun to be voiced by critical anthropologists: that abortion is often a banality in many African women's lives, easily obtained, often safely performed, and enabling them less to limit total numbers of births than to control their timing in relation to marriage, initiation, other births, schooling, vocational matters, and the opinions of others (Renne 1996; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Jok 1999; Bledsoe 2002).

74 These novels do suggest a partial, faulty medicalization of abortion culture that puts women and girls at greater risk from botched procedures while reducing its mundane quality due to the deaths that ensue. The contrast between Ateba's mother's use of emmenagogues and Ateba's insistence that her friend go to the local gynecology ward for her clandestine abortion is suggestive of this historical transition.

75 One risk of these novels as a collective source may be the way that they reinforce the idea that abortion in postcolonial Africa is always dangerous, always a sign of crisis and corruption. Yet it also is a matter of how we read these novels. If we read–and teach–them *not* as reflections of the social, but as constitutive objects, we will necessarily devote more attention to their formal and structural elements and thus to *how* they pose selves in formation. These are stories of a central character or narrator who, in the process of finding herself, growing up, or coming to terms with his/her postcolonial situation, undergoes or witnesses an abortion. All represent the individual experience of abortion as a personal trial inextricably entangled with relationships–with mothers, with boyfriends and girlfriends, with husbands, with sugar-daddy-protectors and patrons. These ordeals may or may not involve an agentive capacity to choose, but all entail psychic and corporeal pain and suffering, sometimes even death. All but Tadjo's starkly critical but ultimately elusive rendering, however, speak to a *desire* to terminate a pregnancy as an aspect of self-realization. Such depth of subjective information is rarely available for historical writing.

76 As historians we also can move outside the microanalysis of each novel and begin to connect their dots, moving among individual scenes and stories to larger questions about cultural production and the narratological features of these stories about partially medicalized pregnancy interruptions. The move from the explicitly autobiographical in Bugul to the explicitly historical in Vera is striking, as are the resemblances of the three middle novels where abortion is part of the décor of hardcore city life in an Africa reeling from structural adjustment and a cash-and-carry public health care system. It is also probably no accident that Vera's novel–the strongest statement of abortion as a self-willed and empowering act–comes from southern Africa not long after the extraordinary liberalization of abortion law in South Africa. Yet this connecting of dots should *not* be simply a search for literary reflections of social realities. Abortion may be a bleak social fact, one that *reflects* few choices for women, especially if we read this fact in an unmediated way. These novels remind us, however, that social facts *are* mediated daily in enormously complex ways by the positioning of those observing, experiencing, and performing them. Ultimately none of these are coerced abortions. A woman or girl is deciding, at least with her body, even if not with her consciousness, to discontinue a pregnancy–to thwart maternity, at least at that juncture. Some combine such containment with a sense of release.

77 Thus, these novels powerfully suggest how to render this vexed and easily sensationalized subject with greater complexity. Induced abortion may be banality of everyday life in Africa, but within the lives of novels, a procured, semi-medicalized abortion is always

psychologically complex. Abortion is an embodied site where the histories of technology, moral and legal sanctions, access to health care, and patterns of therapeutic resort can meet new histories of subjectivity.

78 Historians have much to learn from interrogating fiction, not only as sources of descriptive evidence, but as modes of textualization that enable us to rethink form and structure in historical writing. Relationships among time, narrative, and history have tended to be limited to issues of emplotment, the visibility of the historian as a self-conscious mediator of knowledge, the aesthetics of textualization, and surface issues of figuration. Keith Jenkins' latest attempt to situate histories within four genres, for example, attends more to the aesthetics of form than the politics of formal, narrative, spatial, and substantive choices. I would instead argue that in the best of new experimental histories, there are political and theoretical problems related to evidence, story, weight, metanarrative, and previous inscriptions, and these problems are solved in and through formal experimentation[17]. It is no accident that this paper comes from a gender historian, well versed in debates raging about how to write histories of subjectivity, including those of the global and intimate politics of reproduction.

79 This paper read fiction for archives about abortion, but what it found forced a reading of fiction and possible histories *for form*–for the density and duration of description and spatial renderings, and for distortions of sequential order. Historians too often assume, like Guha, that serialization is method, that telling our stories sequentially is necessary to what we do. Even if we hover with greater density over a particular moment, source, character, or space, this is done without much consciousness of its textual effects: might such hovering be worked to slow down the sensory speed of time? Historians have not thought enough about anachrony as a tool in historical writing. Out-of-order sightings, whether retrospective or anticipatory, can serve to unsettle the flattening effects of linear, homogeneous, empty time. They can introduce textual effects evoking temporality, whether about memory, consequences, or different points of view. They can interject juxtapositions that suggest the unexpected counterpoints or the uncanny. Anachronies, when combined with attention to duration, narrative pacing, and acceleration (Genette 1980), might also be used to underscore the multiple temporalities at play within a given space, context, or subjectivity, not unlike the way Tadjo offers up an unstable set of vignettes, while alerting readers to the blurred borders of the postcolonial condition and the multiplicity of classed and psychic points of view.

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NOTES

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2. This has been an international move, as important new research funded by the Population Council and the World Health Organization suggests (Huntington & Piet-Pelon 1999; Mundigo & Indriso 1999). The fact that post-abortion care was put on the international agenda as a way to get around legal battles over abortion rights at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Peking had an important role in the shift in the social sciences towards issues of post-abortion care; I am grateful to Lynn Thomas for this point.
3. On the relations among history, form, and fiction, see also Steedman (1992).
4. Among Africanist microhistories, in this sense, one could include Marks (1987), White (1987), Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo (1989), Hunt (1999), and McCaskie (2000). Marks' book remains *the* exemplary history of girlhood and subjectivity in African history.
5. Also of note is the first detailed study of abortion, an applied anthropology that combines survey techniques with some qualitative evidence (Koster 2003).
6. Marietou Mbaye (Ken Bugul is a pseudonymn) was born in Ndoucoumane, Senegal in 1948. See Mudimbe-Boyi (1993), d'Almeida (1994), Cazenave (1996), Watson (1997), McNee (2000), Nyatetu-Waigwa (2003). Quotations are from the English translation (Bugul 1991).
7. Véronique Tadjo is an Ivorian poet, novelist, illustrator, and creator of children's books who was born in Paris in 1955, making her about 31 when she published *À vol d'oiseau.* Critical literature includes: d'Almeida (1994), Rice-Maximin (1996), Volet (1999), Harrow (2002). Quotations are from the English translation (Tadjo 2001).
8. A point first made by d'Almeida (1994: 159-160).
9. Calixthe Beyala has been living and publishing highly acclaimed novels in France for years. She won France's prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1999, before being found guilty of plagiarism for outright copying well beyond the limits of acceptable intertextuality in a sensationalized court case; see Harrow, *Less than One*. She remains a feisty and provocative woman, with perhaps a still raging Douala street girl in her ready to fight back against African men and charges of fraud. Like all of these novelists, good biographical material is hard to come by, though there is more for Beyala than the others. See Volet (1993), d'Almeida (1994), Matateyou (1996), Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Harrow (2002), Ekotto (2003).
10. Homoerotic activity is also part of Mabel's sexual education in Speedy Eric's (n.d.). Ontisha chapbook, *Mabel the Sweet Honey that Poured Away,* and these scenes are never subject to moralizing, unlike the harsh condemnation of prostitution and abortion alike.
11. Critical literature is scarce (Gikandi 2003), and I seem to be unusual in considering this a feminist novel. I have concluded undergraduate African history course on "Health and Illness" with *The Sympathetic Undertaker* for years with much success.
12. Special programs have been developed to protect schoolgirls; see Z. Mgalla, D. Schapink & J. Ties Boerma (1998).
13. Yvonne Vera was born in Bulawayo in 1964 and received a Ph.D. from York University for a dissertation on prison literature. *Butterfly Burning* was published at a time when she was playing multiple roles, gallery director, editor, novelist. Farrar, Straus & Giroux has begun to bring out all of her novels; a critical literature is no doubt imminent; see M. Vambe (2003). After receiving several literary prizes and while at work on her sixth novel, she died tragically on April 7, 2005 at the age of forty.
14. Approximate ages in relation to date of first publication are: Bugul at 35, Tadjo at 31, Beyala at 27, and Vera at 34. For an analysis that moves in this direction, see F. Ginsburg (1989).

15. No one has yet explored the role of residents-in-training in this work, though the conditions for seeking extra income by these means are certainly there; see G. RAVIOLA *et al.* (2002).
16. If one assumes that many African gynecologists quietly perform them for private-paying patients, which I do.
17. Keith JENKINS (2004) has been a major advocate of postmodern historical writing, and his latest reader, edited with Alun Munslow, proposes four literary genres of history– reconstructionism, constructionism, deconstructionism, and endisms– while arguing that histories are narrative, aesthetic, and literary artefacts, ultimately the result of fictive creation. Though the argument underlines the epistemological import of any move away from empiricism, the priority given to aesthetic form comes close to eliding the political and theoretical choices made by deconstructionist historians. For an excellent narratological analysis of the work of French New Historians, from Fernand Braudel to Arlette Farge, especially taking on issues of surface figuration, see P. CARRARD (1992), who also points out how much formal experimentation came to history from anthropology.

ABSTRACTS

Clandestine, unsafe abortion is a frequent topic in African feminist novels of the 1980s and 1990s, and the paper proposes that historians should wonder why. It first provides a review of the medical and social scientific literature on induced abortion in Africa, showing how the problem went from one virtual ignorance in 1965 through two explosions of research and concern, one gynecological and popular from the late 1960s; another social scientific and epidemiological from the late 1980s. A close reading of five African novels as artifacts about abortion follows. Each represents abortion as a personal trial inextricably entangled with relationships; and most speak to an individual desire to terminate a pregnancy as an aspect of self-realization. The paper argues that we need a history of girls seeking modernity in Africa and knotted links among this seeking, fantasy and desire, and their resorting to abortion. These novels should be read and taught not as reflections of the social, but as constitutive objects, posing selves in formation. Historians have much to learn from interrogating fiction as modes of textualization that enable us to rethink form, structure, sequence, and anachrony in historical writing.

Entre fiction et histoire : l'avortement dans la littérarure africaine. – L'avortement clandestin est le sujet de nombreux romans féministes africains des années 1980 et 1990. Cet article propose aux historiens d'expliquer les raisons de ce phénomène. Dans un premier temps, nous passerons en revue la littérature médicale et socio-scientifique sur l'avortement en Afrique, en montrant comment cette question totalement ignorée au milieu des années 1960 est devenue un sujet de recherche et d'inquiétude, d'abord gynécologique et populaire à la fin des années 1960 puis socio-scientifique et épidémiologique à partir de la fin des années 1980. Nous analyserons ensuite la signification de l'avortement dans cinq romans africains. Chacun de ces romans représente l'avortement comme une épreuve personnelle inextricablement liée aux relations, et la plupart évoquent un besoin de mettre fin à la grossesse comme une réalisation de soi. Cet article avance qu'il est nécessaire d'écrire une histoire des femmes en quête de modernité en Afrique et d'établir un lien entre cette quête, le fantasme et le désir, et le recours à l'avortement. Il ne s'agit

pas de lire ni d'enseigner ces romans comme le reflet du social mais comme des objets constitutifs. Les historiens ont beaucoup à apprendre en interrogeant la fiction comme des modes de textualisation qui nous permettent de repenser la forme, la structure, la séquence et l'anachronie dans l'écriture historique.

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Mots-clés: sexualité, avortement, romans féministes, écriture de l'histoire, narratologie et histoire, histoire de la reproduction
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AUTHOR

NANCY ROSE HUNT

University of Michigan Ann Arbor.